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GUNFLASH

IN 1943, AS THE ALLIES CLAWED THEIR WAY UP THE BONY SPINE OF ITALY, THE GUNS OF THE ROYAL ARTILLERY WERE DESPERATELY NEEDED TO DISLODGE THE GERMANS GRIMLY CLINGING TO THE HILLS. ONCE AGAIN IN ITS HISTORY, THE REGIMENT LIVED UP TO ITS PROUD MOTTO 'UBIQUE', MEANING 'EVERWHERE'...



Chapter 1. The Farm

EARLY ONE MORNING, A GRIM-FACED GROUP OF MEN CROUCHED ON THE EDGE OF A TINY ITALIAN HILLSIDE FARM. TOUGHENED FROM MONTHS OF HARD FIGHTING, THEY STARED AT THE LIFELESS SCENE BELOW WITH SUSPICION...



CAUTIOUSLY, LIEUTENANT MERSHAM LED HIS MEN INTO THE VALLEY, HIS TENSE NERVES WARNING HIM OF A MOUNTING, UNKNOWN DANGER...



MERSHAM SHOOK HIS HEAD. IT WAS TOO RISKY TO RUSH BLINDLY INTO THE PLACE, BUT THE LIEUTENANT AND THE SERGEANT WERE NOT THE ONLY TWO TO SENSE THAT THERE WAS SOMETHING WRONG ABOUT THE FARM...



THE UNEASY SILENCE TORE AT THE NERVES OF THE ENTIRE PATROL. BUT NONE SUFFERED AS MUCH AS GUNNER-SIGNALLER TOM PRENTICE, A YOUNGSTER WITH AN OVER-ACTIVE IMAGINATION...

THIS PLACE COULD BE A TRAP. SOME JERRY MIGHT HAVE ME IN HIS SIGHTS RIGHT NOW. I'D BETTER STICK CLOSE TO THE SERGEANT...



WITH A FINAL, SHORT RUSH, THE PATROL REACHED THE FARM, FINGERS TENSE ON TRIGGERS AS THEY CHECKED THE SILENT BUILDINGS...

CLARKE! THOMPSON! JONES! CHECK THE BARN! THE REST OF YOU, SPREAD OUT AND BE CAREFUL!

LEAVE IT TO US, SARGE!

MAYBE WE CAN FIND SOMETHING TO EAT!



WITH TOM BY HIS SIDE, THE BIG SERGEANT REACHED THE FARMHOUSE. THE DOOR SLAMMED OPEN AT A SAVAGE KICK FROM HIS BOOT...

EMPTY!
WHERE IS
EVERYONE?

LOOK AT
THAT FOOD!
IT LOOKS AS
IF THEY LEFT
IN THE
MIDDLE OF A
MEAL!



TIRED AND HUNGRY, THE FOOD LOOKED APPETISING TO THE YOUNG SIGNALLER. IMPULSIVELY, HE REACHED TOWARDS A SLAB OF RICH CHEESE...

STAY
HERE,
PRENTICE.
I'M GOING
TO CHECK
UPSTAIRS.

DON'T
TOUCH THAT
FOOD, YOU
IDIOT!

WHAT?
I...I...
ONLY...



CURTLY, MERSHAM CUT SHORT THE STAMMERED EXPLANATION. EYES NARROWED, HE SNATCHED THE RIFLE AND BAYONET FROM TOM...

NO ITALIAN
FARMER WOULD
LEAVE HIS PLACE
LIKE THIS. MY
GUESS IS THE
WHOLE PLACE
IS BOOBY
TRAPPED!



CAREFULLY, MERSHAM SLID THE POINT OF THE BAYONET BENEATH THE CHEESE. THEN, DUCKING LOW, HE JERKED DOWN ON THE BUTT OF THE RIFLE. AN EARSPLITTING ROAR HALF-DEAFENED THE THREE MEN...

THE CUNNING
PERISHERS! CONTACT
FUSES AND ENOUGH
EXPLOSIVE TO
MAIM A MAN
FOR LIFE!



BUT FOR SOME OF THE PATROL, THE WARNING CAME TOO LATE. VICIOUS EXPLOSIONS BLASTED SPITEFULLY, AS THE HIDDEN EXPLOSIVES TOOK THEIR TERRIBLE TOLL...



HIGH ON THE HILL OVERLOOKING THE VALLEY, A GERMAN OFFICER SMILED AS THE SOUND OF EXPLOSIONS ECHOED THROUGH THE AIR...

HEAR THAT, FELDWEBEL ?
THE ENGLANDERS HAVE
WALKED RIGHT INTO
OUR LITTLE TRAP !

JA, HERR
OBERLEUTNANT.
SHALL WE OPEN
FIRE NOW ?



IMPATIENT AFTER LONG HOURS OF WAITING, THE FELDWEBEL WAS EAGER FOR ACTION. BUT THE OFFICER HAD OTHER PLANS IN MIND...

WE SHALL WAIT FOR A BETTER TARGET. LET THE OTHER GROUPS KNOW THEY MUST WAIT FOR MY SIGNAL.

JAWOHL, HERR OBERLEUTNANT.
WE ARE ZEROED IN ON THE FARM.
THE ENGLANDERS WILL NOT STAND A CHANCE.



UNAWARE OF THE WATCHFUL THREAT FROM THE HILLS, THE PATROL FINISHED THE PERILOUS TASK OF CLEARING THE BOOBY TRAPS FROM THE FARM...

THE PLACE IS ALL CLEAR NOW, SIR. WE'VE THREE CASUALTIES — TWO SERIOUS, ONE DEAD!

PUT THE WOUNDED IN THE BARN UNTIL WE CAN SEND THEM BACK. WHERE'S THAT SIGNALLER?



WITH THE AREA CLEARED, THE FOLLOW-UP DETACHMENT OF 'B' BATTERY COULD ADVANCE AND TAKE OVER. BUT EVEN AS TOM CONTACTED THE UNIT, A FROWN CREASED THE LIEUTENANT'S FOREHEAD...

I'M STILL NOT HAPPY ABOUT THIS PLACE, SERGEANT. I'VE GOT THE FEELING WE'RE BEING WATCHED!

THERE ARE NO ANIMALS, MAYBE THAT'S WHAT MAKES IT SEEM STRANGE, SIR. A FARM SHOULD HAVE ANIMALS.

MERSHAM GRUNTED, STILL NOT SATISFIED. TILTING HIS HEAD, HE STARED UP AT THE WIND-TOWER AND CAME TO A SUDDEN DECISION...

WE'D BETTER SET UP AN OBSERVATION POST. CLIMB THAT TOWER, PRENTICE. IF YOU SPOT ANYTHING, RADIO BACK AND STOP THE UNIT.

RIGHT, SIR.



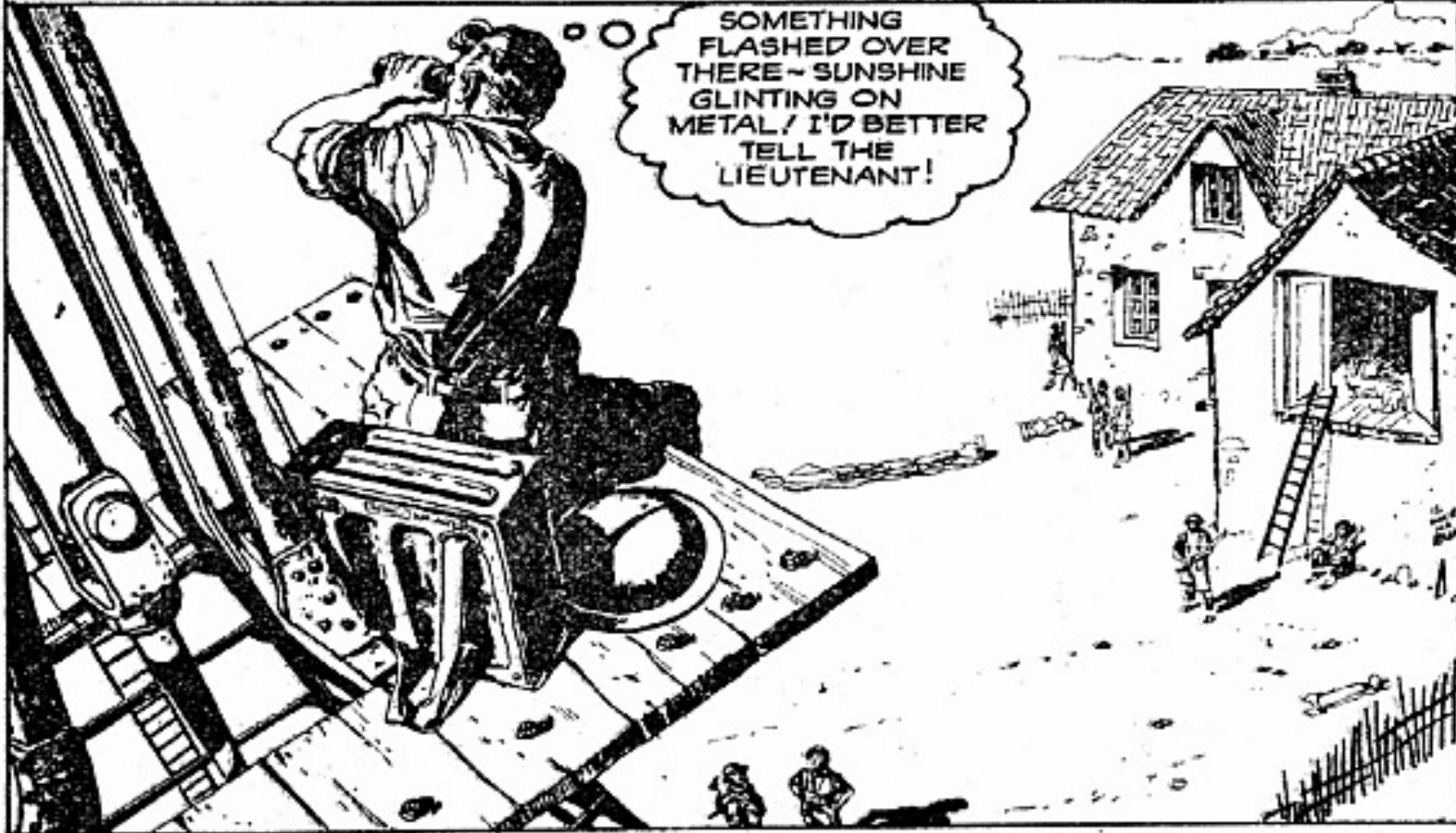
THE TOWER WAS OLD, THE METAL RUSTED, AND THE WHOLE CONSTRUCTION SWAYED
BENEATH THE WEIGHT OF THE YOUNG SIGNALLER . . .



BACK IN THE HILLS, THE FOLLOW-UP DETACHMENT OF 'B' BATTERY SWUNG INTO ACTION, THE WHEELS OF THEIR VEHICLES CHURNING THE DUSTY SOIL AS THEY LABOURED TOWARDS THE FARM . . .



PERCHED AT THE TOP OF THE TOWER, TOM GRINNED AS HE SPOTTED THE PLUME OF DUST FROM THE FOLLOW-UP TRANSPORT IN THE REAR. THEN, AS HE TURNED, HE STIFFENED IN STARTLED SURPRISE...



oberleutnant Karl Schlossmann gritted his teeth as he saw the tiny figure on the tower signal to those below...

TEUFEL! THEIR OBSERVER HAS SIGHTED SOMETHING! INSTRUCT ALL UNITS TO FIRE IMMEDIATELY I GIVE THE ORDER!



FACE GRIM, PANTING FROM THE EXERTION, MERSHAM CLIMBED TO THE TOP OF THE TOWER, ALL TOO CONSCIOUS OF THE UNSUSPECTING COLUMN APPROACHING THE FARM...



DESPERATELY, TOM TRIED TO MAKE CONTACT, THEN HELPLESSLY SHOOK HIS HEAD. MERSHAM, FACE PALE BEHIND HIS TAN, LOOKED HELPLESSLY AT THE COLUMN HEADING TOWARDS THEM...



EVEN AS HE SPOKE, THE GERMANS SPRANG INTO ACTION.
SCHLOSSMANN GAVE THE LONG-AWAITED ORDER TO FIRE.

WE WILL BLAST
THE FARM OFF
THE FACE OF THE
EARTH~AND THE
ENGLANDERS
WITH IT! ALL
UNITS~
FEUER!



THE MORTARS OPENED UP, THEIR SQUAT PROJECTILES SOARING IN HIGH ARCS
TOWARDS THE MEN CLUSTERED AROUND THE FARM...

GET THOSE
MORTARS FIRING
AT TOP SPEED!
I WANT THREE
SHELLS IN THE
AIR FROM
EACH WEAPON
AT ONCE!

JA,
FELDWEBEL.

WUNDERBAR!
RIGHT ON
TARGET!

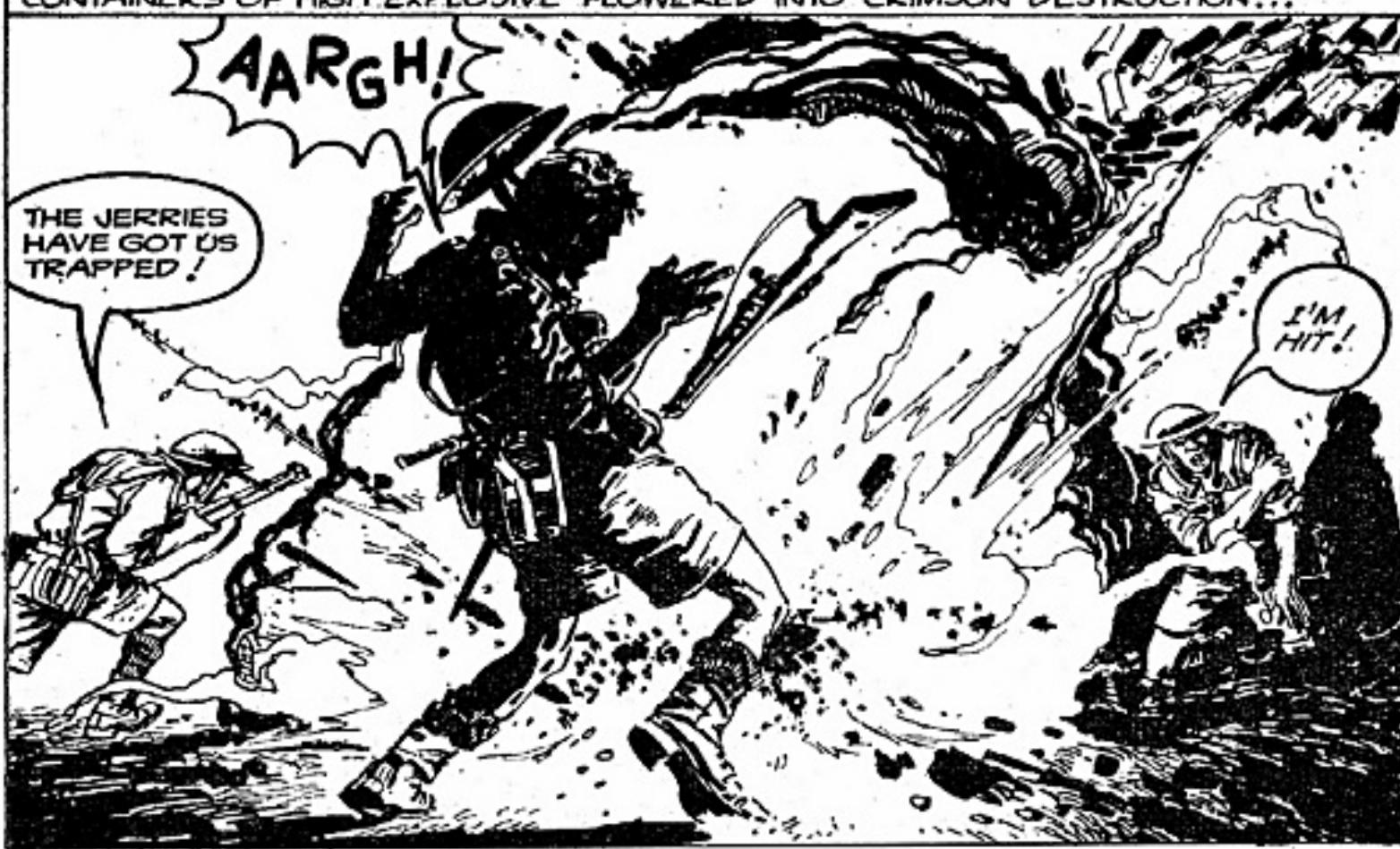


MERSHAM'S SHOUT OF WARNING WAS LOST IN THE SUDDEN FURY AS THE STEEL CONTAINERS OF HIGH EXPLOSIVE FLOWERED INTO CRIMSON DESTRUCTION...

AARGH!

THE JERRIES HAVE GOT US TRAPPED!

I'M HIT!



SICK WITH HORROR, MERSHAM FORCED HIMSELF TO REMAIN CALM, SNATCHING HIS MAPS, HE RAPPED A STRING OF ORDERS AT THE YOUNG SIGNALLER...

YOU'RE ON TO BATTERY? TELL THEM SELECTIVE FIRE AT REFERENCE THREE-FIVE-SEVEN-TWO. GOT THAT?

I'VE GOT IT, SIR!



FAR BACK IN THE HILLS, A GUNNER JERKED A LANYARD AND SENT A TWENTY-FIVE POUND SHELL SCREAMING INTO THE DISTANCE...



THE SCREAM OF THE SHELL SLASHED ACROSS THE COUGHING ROAR OF THE MORTAR BOMBS, AND A FLOWER OF SMOKE AND FLAME BLOSSOMED ON THE ENEMY SLOPE...



PINNED DOWN BY THE MURDEROUS MORTAR BARRAGE, THE GUNNERS' PATROL WAS SUFFERING HEAVY CASUALTIES. AGAIN A RANGING SHELL SCREAMED ACROSS THE HILLS.

CORRECT A HUNDRED YARDS TO THE LEFT AND FIFTY DOWN. FULL SALVO!

RIGHT, SIR!



TOM'S ADMIRATION FOR THE OFFICER INCREASED AS SHELLS RAINED DOWN ON THE GERMAN MORTAR CREWS. IT WAS SUPERB FIRE-DIRECTION AT EXTREME RANGE...



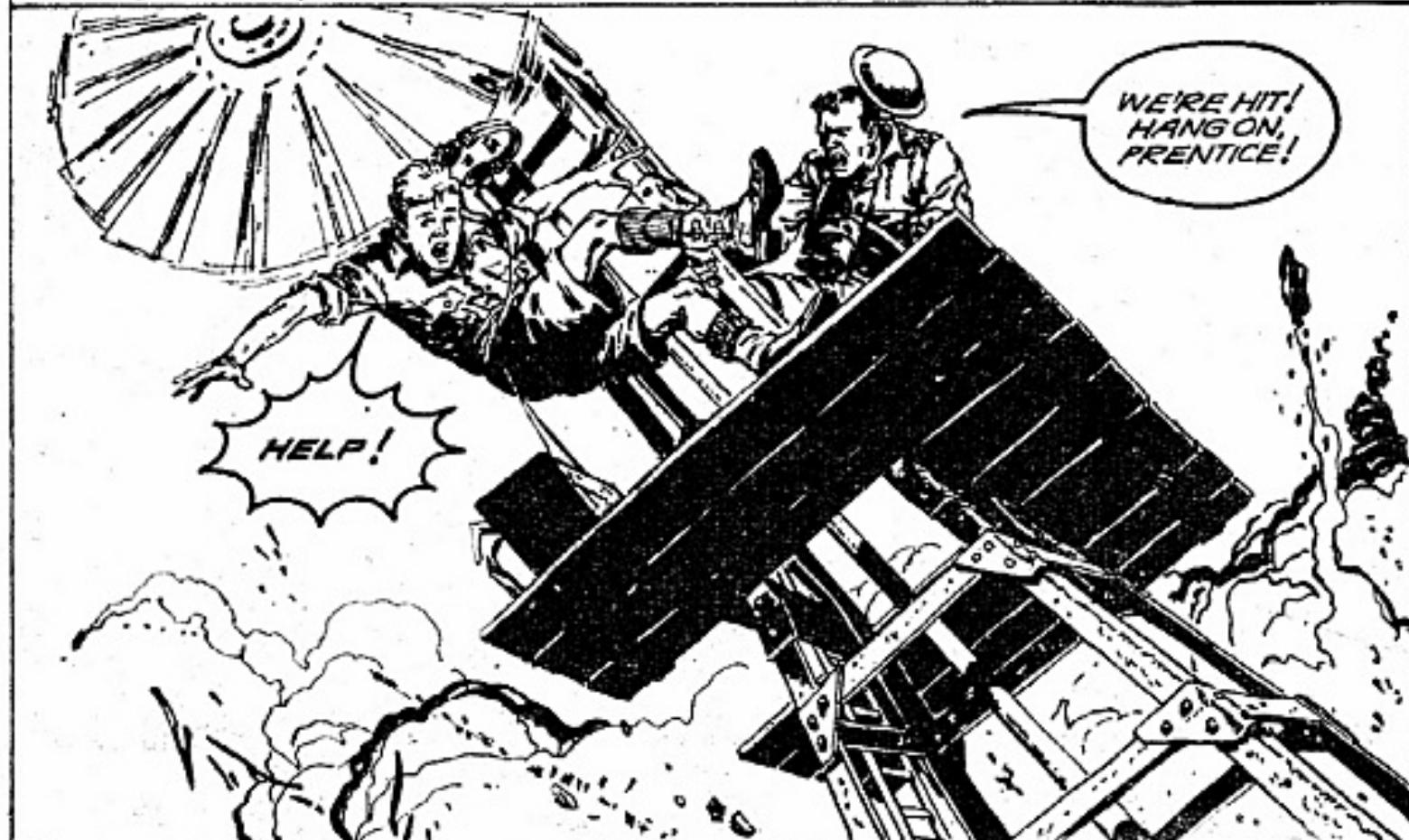
SHAKING WITH RAGE, SCHLOSSMANN GLARED AT THE SLENDER TOWER. WITHOUT THEIR OBSERVATION POST, THE ENGLISH GUNS WOULD BE BLIND AND USELESS ...

WE ARE NOT YET DEFEATED. MORTARS THREE AND FIVE, AIM AT THAT TOWER! BRING IT DOWN AND THE ENGLANDERS ARE HELPLESS!



TWICE, HEAVY EXPLOSIONS SHOOK THE SLENDER TOWER. THEN, WITH A SUDDEN RASP OF METAL, THE STRUCTURE TILTED... TOM PRENTICE FELT HIMSELF FALLING...

WE'RE HIT! HANG ON, PRENTICE!



SUDDENLY, TOM JARRED TO A HALT, HIS ANKLE TRAPPED IN THE ANGLE OF TWO STRUTS, THE WHIRLING STEEL VANES INCHES FROM HIS HEAD...

DON'T
MOVE.
PRENTICE!

I CAN'T
MOVE! IF I
SLIP I'LL BE
CUT TO PIECES
IN THE
VANES!



FORCING HIMSELF TO RELAX, TOM FELT HIS LEG GRABBED AND LIFTED AWAY FROM THE WHISPERING BLADES...

GRAB
HOLD OF
SOMETHING,
QUICK! I CAN'T
HOLD YOUR
WEIGHT FOR
LONG!

ALL
RIGHT, SIR.
I'VE GOT
IT!



Chapter 2. *The Tables Turned*

BACK ON THE GROUND, MERSHAM AND PRENTICE RAN THE GAUNTLET OF THE MORTAR FIRE AND JOINED SERGEANT THORN WHERE HE WAITED WITH HIS MEN...



MERSHAM NODDED WITH CURT SATISFACTION, BUT HIS VOICE WAS GRIM AS HE RAPPED TERSE ORDERS. TO SUCCEED, HIS ATTACK HAD TO BE TIMED TO THE SPLIT-SECOND...

THE BATTERY'S READY, SIR!

GOOD! FIRST SALVO IN EXACTLY TWO MINUTES. THE SECOND FIVE MINUTES AFTER THAT. WE ADVANCE AS SOON AS THE FIRST SALVO FALLS. UNDERSTOOD, SERGEANT?

YES, SIR!



TENSELY, THEY WAITED AS THE SECONDS CRAWLED PAST. THEN, AS THE FIRST SALVO SMASHED INTO THE HILL, THE GRIM-FACED GUNNERS RACED FORWARD...



HEARTS POUNDING, BREATH RASPING, THEY FLUNG THEMSELVES TOWARDS THE ENEMY, EVERY MOMENT EXPECTING TO BE CAUGHT IN A SCYTHING HAIL OF LEAD...



ALTHOUGH NUMBED AND SHAKEN BY THE FURY OF THE SALVO, MOST OF THE GERMANS HAD SURVIVED. COLDLY, SCHLOSSMANN WATCHED THE ADVANCING GUNNERS, HIS THIN LIPS CURVED IN A CONTEMPTUOUS SNEER...

WE CANNOT STAND ANOTHER SALVO, HERR OBERLEUTNANT. WOULD IT NOT BE BETTER TO DISPERSE?

DUMMKOPF! WOULD THEY BE ATTACKING INTO THE FIRE OF THEIR OWN GUNS? NO, THERE WILL BE NO MORE SHELLS...



THE ENGLANDERS ARE DESPERATE, FELDWEBEL. WE SHALL NOW DESTROY THEM. NOT ONE SHALL ESCAPE MY TRAP!

JA, HERR OBERLEUTNANT



RIFLES COCKED, MACHINE-GUNS AND MORTARS READY, THE GERMANS WAITED FOR THEIR ATTACKERS...

FIRE AT THREE HUNDRED METRES, ERNST. AT THAT RANGE EVEN YOU CANNOT MISS!



MERSHAM HAD OTHER IDEAS. AS THE SECOND HAND OF HIS WATCH REACHED THE DEADLINE, HE SHOUTED A FRANTIC COMMAND...



THE GERMAN GUNS SNARLED INTO LIFE. MERSHAM'S PATROL FLUNG THEMSELVES TO THE GROUND, AND THE SEARING HAIL OF LEAD FLASHED HARMLESSLY ABOVE THEM.



THORN SNARLED WITH IMPATIENCE AT TOM'S QUESTION...

WE FIGHT, YOU WEAK-KNEED NINNY! GET STUCK IN, FOR PETE'S SAKE, AND DON'T HANG AROUND WAITING FOR SOMEONE TO TELL YOU WHAT TO DO!



TOM FLUSHED. THE SERGEANT'S WORDS HURT, FOR HE KNEW THEY WERE TRUE. HE ALWAYS NEEDED SOMEONE TO FOLLOW, A STRONGER PERSONALITY TO LEAN ON...



AT THAT MOMENT, MERSHAM WAS SICK WITH WORRY. AGAIN AND AGAIN, HE GLANCED AT HIS WATCH, HOPING FOR THE SALVO WHICH COULD MEAN LIFE TO THEM ALL. IN THE MEANTIME, GERMAN MORTARS WERE CRASHING AMONG THEM ...



THEN, CUTTING OVER THE COUGH OF MORTARS AND THE SNARL OF SMALL ARMS, CAME THE SCREAMING WHINE OF A SALVO OF TWENTY-FIVE POUND SHELLS...



WITH MERCILESS ACCURACY, THE SHELLS EXPLODED IN A RIPPING HAIL OF SHRAPNEL AND SEARING FLAME, FLINGING MEN AND MORTARS HIGH INTO THE AIR...



IN THE FOLLOWING SILENCE, THORN'S BULL ROAR JERKED THE GUNNERS TO THEIR FEET, EYES HARD, FACES SET IN THEIR GRIM DESIRE FOR REVENGE...



IN A YELLING WAVE OF FURY, THE GUNNERS SLAMMED INTO THE DISORGANISED GERMANS WHO DESPERATELY TRIED TO STAND THEIR GROUND...



THE BRITISH WAVE SWEPT FORWARD RELENTLESSLY,
UNTIL THE HILL ECHOED TO THE FURY OF GRIM,
HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT...



HIS FACE SPLIT IN A SAVAGE SMILE, THE BIG
SERGEANT LUNGED FORWARD, EYES INTENT ONLY
ON THE HATED FIELD-GREY UNIFORMS...



CARELESS OF HIS OWN SAFETY, TOM SCORNED GERMAN BULLETS, HIS EYES SEARCHING FOR THE MAN WHO HAD TWICE SAVED HIS LIFE...

THERE'S LIEUTENANT MERSHAM. MAYBE I CAN GIVE HIM A HAND...



MERSHAM GRINNED AS THE GERMANS BROKE AND RAN UP THE HILL. VOICE CRACKING, HE YELLED TO HIS MEN...



AS HIS MEN RACED AFTER THE GERMANS, MERSHAM TURNED BACK TO THE MAIN POSITION. SUDDENLY HE HALTED, THE BLOOD DRAINING FROM HIS FACE AS A GRIM FIGURE STEPPED BEFORE HIM ...



SICKLY, MERSHAM STARED AT THE GRIM MUZZLE OF SCHLOSSMANN'S SCHMEISSE, MUSCLES TENSED AGAINST THE DEADLY THREAT IT CARRIED...



NEITHER SAW TOM RUNNING TOWARDS THEM. FLINGING HIS RIFLE TO HIS SHOULDER, THE YOUNG SIGNALLER GAVE A GASP OF HORROR AS THE FIRING PIN FELL WITH A DULL CLICK ...

JERKING AT THE BOLT OF HIS RIFLE, TOM STARTED FORWARD, TERRIFIED THAT THE GERMAN WOULD FIRE WHILE HIS GUN WAS JAMMED...



WARNED BY THE SCRAPE OF BOOTED FEET, SCHLOSSMANN TURNED, EYES NARROWED AGAINST THE GLARE OF THE SUN, FINGER CLOSING ON THE TRIGGER OF HIS SCHMEISSER



TOO LATE, SCHLOSSMANN SAW THE RIFLE POINTED AT HIS CHEST. EVEN AS HIS FINGER SQUEEZED THE TRIGGER, TOM'S RIFLE BARKED ANGRILY...



ON THE SLOPE, THE SNARL OF GUNS FADED AS THE GERMAN RESISTANCE WAS BROKEN. TRIUMPHANTLY, THE GUNNERS MOPPED UP WHAT WAS LEFT OF THE OPPONITION...



ANGER DARKENED THE BIG SERGEANT'S FACE AS HE SEARCHED FOR TOM PRENTICE. FINDING HIM AT LAST, HE GAVE HIM THE ROUGH EDGE OF HIS TONGUE . . .



QUIETLY, THE LIEUTENANT EXPLAINED WHAT HAD HAPPENED. THORN FROWNED, THEN SHOOK HIS HEAD STUBBORNLY...

I'M GLAD HE MANAGED TO SAVE YOU, SIR, BUT THAT ISN'T THE POINT. HIS PLACE WAS WITH THE OTHERS, NOT RUNNING AROUND LOOKING FOR HIS HERO... BEG PARDON, SIR!

HERO?
WHAT DO
YOU MEAN,
SERGEANT?



SERGEANT THORN KNEW WHAT HE WAS TALKING ABOUT CLOSER TO THE MEN THAN
THE OFFICER, HE SPOKE FROM EXPERIENCE ...

PRENTICE NEEDS SOMEONE
TO LEAN ON. YOU'VE SAVED
HIS LIFE AND HE RESPECTS
AND ADMires YOU. BUT
HE'S A SOLDIER AND HE
SHOULD DEPEND ON
HIMSELF.

I SEE, WELL, I WON'T
ENCOURAGE HIM.
PERHAPS YOU CAN
FIND SOME WAY
TO SETTLE IT,
SERGEANT.



TO THORN IT WAS EASY TO SETTLE. THE
INTERMEDIATE SIGNALLER HAD BEEN
KILLED DURING THE ATTACK, AND TOM WAS
JUST THE MAN TO TAKE HIS PLACE ...

YOU'VE BEEN RELIEVED FROM
RECCE DUTY, BUT DON'T
THINK THIS IS AN EASY JOB.
REMEMBER, THE LADS
DEPEND ON YOU ...



Chapter 3. A Lost Message

TOM'S NEW JOB WAS TO ACT AS A RADIO-LINK BETWEEN THE RECCE PATROLS AND THE BATTERY. HE ALSO WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL MESSAGES TO AND FROM BRIGADE H.Q.

ANYTHING
INTERESTING
COMING THROUGH,
TOM?

JUST
ROUTINE
POSITIONING.
WHY, ARE YOU
EXPECTING A
MESSAGE FROM
HOME?



GRINNING, THE DRIVER SHOOK HIS HEAD. VOICE LOWERED, HE JERKED A THUMB TOWARDS THE FARMHOUSE, NOW USED AS AN ORDERLY ROOM ...

JOE TELLS ME THAT OUR BUNCH OF JERRY PRISONERS HAS GOT H.Q. WORRIED WITH WHAT THEY HAD TO SAY. I WONDERED IF ANYTHING WAS BREWING...

IT'S JUST
ANOTHER
RUMOUR...



AT THAT MOMENT, TOUGH, BEETLE-BROWED BRIGADIER WINSLADE COULD ONLY WISH THAT IT WAS BACK AT BRIGADE H.Q., HE STABBED A GNARLED FINGER AT A MAP AS WORRIED OFFICERS LISTENED TO THE HARSH RASP OF HIS VOICE...

INTELLIGENCE REPORT A HEAVY CONCENTRATION OF GERMANS HERE. THIS PLACES SEVERAL OF OUR BATTERIES IN DANGER!



THE ENEMY MUST BE BEATEN BACK. ALL REOCE PATROLS WILL STAND BY TO ENGAGE THE ENEMY. ALL UNITS WILL BE KEPT POSTED AS TO THE SITUATION!



THE GERMAN ATTACK WAS A DESPERATE MOVE TO BREAK THE ALLIED ADVANCE. IF THEY COULD CAPTURE THE BRITISH GUNS THEY COULD HOLD THE SECTOR OPEN FOR REINFORCEMENTS...

AT LAST WE ARE HEADING THE RIGHT WAY, HERR HAUPTMANN ~ FORWARD, NOT BACK.

YOU ARE YOUNG, KLAUS, AND EAGER...



HAUPTMANN BRAUN WAS TOO WISE IN THE WAYS OF WAR TO HAVE ANY ILLUSIONS. THE GERMAN ARMY WAS ENGAGED IN A GAMBLE AND HE KNEW IT . . .

WE WILL FORCE-MARCH OVER THE HILLS UNTIL WE ENGAGE THE ENEMY. THEN WE MUST HOLD THEM UNTIL THE REINFORCEMENTS ARRIVE ON THE LONGER ROUTE . . .



BUT, DETERMINED AS THE GERMANS WERE, THEY FACED MEN STILL MORE RESOLUTE. HASTILY DESPATCHED UNITS MET THE GERMAN COLUMN IN SAVAGE CONFLICT . . .



GUNFIRE ECHOED SPITEFULLY FROM THE HILLS AS THE TWO SIDES CLASHED...



THE GERMAN ATTACK WAS SUCCESSFUL, BUT THEIR VICTORY WAS DEARLY BOUGHT...



AS COMBAT UNITS RUSHED TO ENGAGE THE ENEMY, THE GUNNERS OF 'B' BATTERY STRUGGLED TO MOVE THEIR GUNS OVER THE HARSH TERRAIN ...



GRIMLY, THE GUNNERS CLAWED THEIR WAY TOWARDS THEIR ADVANCE UNIT WHERE THEIR GUNS WOULD DO THE MOST GOOD ...



TOM PRENTICE WAS JUST RECEIVING ANOTHER MESSAGE AT THAT MOMENT. HIS FACE WHITENED AS HE ACKNOWLEDGED THE SIGNAL...



NUMBLY, TOM STARED DOWN AT THE MESSAGE HE HAD SCRABLED ON HIS PAD... THE MESSAGE HE WAS TO PASS ON TO LIEUTENANT MERSHAM'S PATROL...



SLOWLY, HE TORE THE MESSAGE FROM ITS PAD. THE YOUNG SOLDIER'S MIND WAS IN A TURMOIL...



STRIDING PAST THE JEEP, MERSHAM PAUSED, LOOKING CURIOUSLY AT THE DRAWN FACE OF THE YOUNG SIGNALLER. TOM GULPED AS HE MET HIS EYES...

YOU LOOK ALL IN, PRENTICE. NOTHING WRONG, I HOPE? IS THAT MESSAGE FOR ME?

IT'S...ER... IT'S NOT A MESSAGE, SIR. I WAS JUST GETTING RID OF SOME OLD PAPER...



MERSHAM HESITATED FOR A SECOND, THEN WALKED ON. THE YOUNG SIGNALLER FELT A STRANGE SENSE OF GUILT AT HAVING LIED, BUT MINGLED WITH IT WAS A FEELING OF TRIUMPH THAT HE HAD SAVED MERSHAM FROM POSSIBLE DEATH...

IT'S TOO LATE TO HAND IN THE MESSAGE NOW. STILL, THEY WON'T MISS ONE SMALL GROUP AT THE FRONT...



BUT TOM WAS WRONG. WHEN EVERY MAN COUNTED, AN ENTIRE PATROL WAS TOO IMPORTANT TO BE OVERLOOKED...

BEST GUN IN THE BATTERY IS OUR NELLIE. EVEN AT EXTREME RANGE SHE'S DEAD ACCURATE...

PRENTICE! YOU'RE WANTED IN THE ORDERLY ROOM!



SERGEANT THORN WAS GRIM-FACED AS HE LED THE WAY TOWARDS THE FARMHOUSE ...

WHAT DOES THE OLD MAN WANT, SARGE?

AN OFFICER HAS ARRIVED FROM THE FRONT. THE OLD MAN'S HOLDING AN INQUIRY YOU'LL FIND OUT ABOUT IT WHEN YOU SEE HIM!



MAJOR HASLOP, THE BATTERY COMMANDER, STARED AT TOM WITH COLD, STEEL-GREY EYES...

DID YOU
RECEIVE A SIGNAL
ON THE WIRELESS
ORDERING OUR
RECCE PATROL
INTO ACTION,
PRENTICE?

I...WELL,
THAT IS...
YES, SIR...



TO LIE WAS USELESS. HE HAD ACKNOWLEDGED THE MESSAGE AND MAJOR HASLOP MUST KNOW THAT. SUDDENLY, IT WAS ALL TOO MUCH FOR THE YOUNG SIGNALLER. FACED WITH THE PROSPECT OF PUNISHMENT, HE PANICKED...

WHAT DID
YOU DO WITH
THE MESSAGE,
PRENTICE?

I...ER...
I PASSED
IT ON,
SIR...

THAT'S
A LIE!



LIEUTENANT MERSHAM LUNGED FORWARD AND GRABBED TOM'S SHIRT, EYES BLAZING, HE STARED AT PRENTICE'S WHITE FACE...

THAT'S A LIE AND YOU KNOW IT! I NEVER RECEIVED THAT MESSAGE!

DON'T... I...

LIEUTENANT, CONTROL YOURSELF!



TREMBLING WITH RAGE, MERSHAM RELEASED TOM. HASLOP STARED COLDLY AT THE EXCITED OFFICER...

LIEUTENANT MERSHAM, YOU ARE UNDER OPEN ARREST UNTIL YOU ARE SENT BACK TO FACE COURT-MARTIAL FOR WILFUL DISOBEDIENCE OF AN ORDER!

BUT I DIDN'T RECEIVE THAT ORDER!



OUTSIDE, TOM STOPPED THORN AS THE SERGEANT STARTED TO WALK AWAY...

WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN TO HIM, SARGE?

IF HE'S FOUND GUILTY, HE'LL LOSE HIS COMMISSION, BE SENT TO PRISON, OR HE COULD EVEN BE SHOT! ARE YOU SATISFIED, YOU SNIVELLING YOUNG DRIP?

TOM FLINCHED BENEATH THE RAW CONTEMPT IN THE SERGEANT'S VOICE. LEFT ON HIS OWN, HE BEGAN TO REALISE JUST WHAT HIS HASTY, IMPULSIVE ACTION OF QUASHING THE MESSAGE HAD LED TO...

THEY GUESS I LIED, BUT THEY CAN'T PROVE IT. IF I CONFESS, THEN I'LL RUN THE SAME RISK AS MERSHAM... I MIGHT EVEN BE SHOT!



LATE THAT NIGHT, A DISPATCH RIDER ROARED INTO THE CAMP. THE BATTERY COMMANDER HELD A QUICK COUNCIL OF WAR...

THE ENEMY ARE BREAKING THROUGH AND THEIR REINFORCEMENTS ARE TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT. OUR COMBAT UNITS NEED MORE TIME BEFORE THEY CAN ENGAGE...



WHAT'S THE PLAN, SIR?

THE PLAN WAS SIMPLE. 'B' BATTERY STOOD IN THE PATH OF THE GERMAN ADVANCE ~ AND 'B' BATTERY WOULD BUY THE TIME THE COMBAT UNITS NEEDED...

THE GERMAN REINFORCEMENTS ARE HEADING INTO RANGE OF OUR GUNS. WE'LL SEND FORWARD A STRONG ADVANCE UNIT AND SET UP AN OBSERVATION POST. WITH LUCK, WE CAN HOLD THEM.

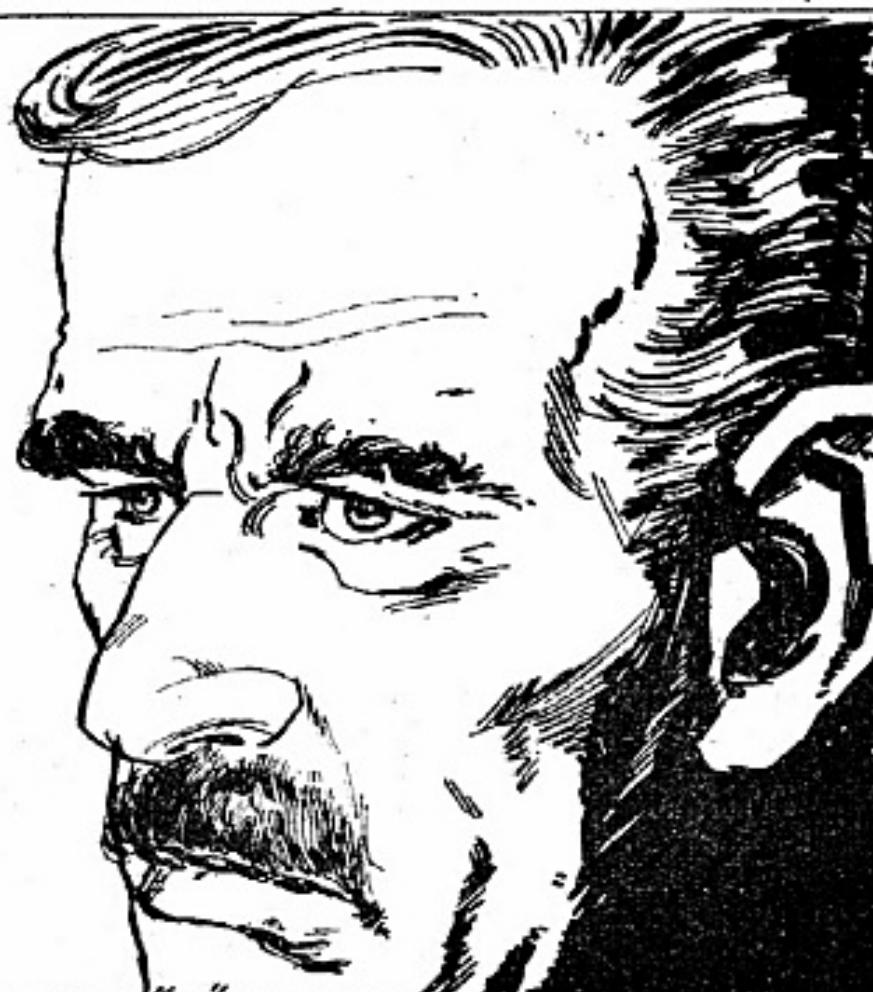
WHAT ABOUT MERSHAM, SIR?

I STILL THINK THAT SIGNALLER WAS LYING!



HASLOP HESITATED. MERSHAM HAD THE REPUTATION OF BEING A BRAVE AND COURAGEOUS OFFICER AND THOSE QUALITIES WERE GOING TO BE IN DEMAND.

WE'LL NEED EVERY MAN ~ AND THIS JOB IS JUST MERSHAM'S CUP OF TEA. YES, MERSHAM CAN TAKE CHARGE OF THE O.P.



Chapter 4. The Castle of Doom

AT DAWN NEXT DAY, LIEUTENANT MERSHAM LED HIS PART OF THE UNIT UP TO THE FRONT. CLINGING TO A SOARING PEAK, A CRUMBLING MASS OF HAND-HEWN STONE LOOKED DOWN ON THE ROAD-CUT VALLEY BEYOND...

WE'LL SET UP OUR
OBSERVATION POST IN
THAT RUIN. TOMKINS,
YOU COME WITH ME.
THE REST OF YOU,
SCATTER!

RIGHT,
SIR!

WE MUST
BE RIGHT ON
TOP OF THE
JERRIES...



OTHERS, TOO, HAD SPOTTED
THE CASTLE. FROM THE VALLEY
BELOW, HAUPTMANN BRAUN
HAD EXAMINED THE RUIN...

THAT RUIN WOULD
MAKE A GOOD
OBSERVATION POST
FOR THE ENGLANDERS.
KLAUS! TAKE A
PATROL AND
DEMOLISH IT!

JAWOHL,
HERR
HAUPTMANN!



SO IT WAS THAT, AS MERSHAM'S PATROL CRESTED TOWARDS THE CASTLE, EYES GLEAMED AT THEM COLDLY OVER MENACING GUN-BARRELS ...



MERCILESSLY, THE GERMANS OPENED FIRE, THEIR SHATTERING HAIL OF LEAD SMASHING INTO THE STARTLED GUNNERS ...



FAR BACK DOWN THE SLOPE, TOM STIFFENED AS WORDS CRACKLED FROM HIS EARPHONES. EXCITEDLY, HE CALLED TO THORN, WHO HAD BEEN LEFT IN CHARGE OF THE GROUP...

SARGE! THE LIEUTENANT'S IN TROUBLE, THEY'VE RUN INTO A JERRY PATROL AND NEED HELP!

FIVE MEN STAY ON GUARD, THE REST FOLLOW ME! AT THE DOUBLE!



AS THORN LED HIS MEN UP THE SLOPE, THE SURVIVORS OF THE TRAPPED PATROL FOUGHT BACK WITH THE FURY OF DESPERATION...

UNLESS THE OTHERS GET HERE SOON, WE'VE HAD IT. DID YOU MAKE CONTACT OKAY?

THEY GOT THE MESSAGE, SIR!



Gunflash

MERSHAM DUCKED AS THE FIRE OF A DOZEN GUNS SEARED TOWARDS HIM, WHINING LEAD RICOCHETING FROM THE STONE WALL..THE SIGNALLER GAVE A CRY OF ANGUISH ...



RECKLESSLY, MERSHAM SCRAMBLED DOWN TO THE LIMP FIGURE BELOW. THE SIGNALLER WAS DEAD, THE RADIO A SHATTERED MASS OF USELESS WRECKAGE ...



THE SNARL OF GUNFIRE DIED AS THE VICTORIOUS GERMANS RAN FORWARD. ONE OF THEM, LOADED WITH EXPLOSIVES, HEADED FOR THE RUIN . . .



SNATCHING A GRENADE FROM HIS BELT, THE FELDWEBEL SWUNG BACK HIS ARM FOR THE THROW. A RIFLE CRACKED VICIOUSLY FROM THE EDGE OF THE CLEARING...



THORN DUCKED AS THE GRENADE EXPLODED, THEN LED THE RUSH FORWARD. FRANTICALLY, THE GERMANS TRIED TO SMASH BACK THE BRITISH COUNTER-ATTACK.

ACHTUNG!
COMBAT
POSITIONS!
SCHNELL!



WITH BRUTE FORCE, THE GUNNERS PRESSED HOME THEIR CHARGE...

GIVE IT
'EM,
LADS!



ONLY ONE GERMAN MANAGED TO ESCAPE TO THE CASTLE, LOADED WITH EXPLOSIVES. HE STILL HOPED TO COMPLETE HIS MISSION, BUT MERSHAM CAUGHT UP WITH HIM...

TOO BAD,
JERRY, YOU
ALMOST
MADE IT!

AGH!



STEPPING OVER THE BODY, MERSHAM WENT TO FIND THORN. EYES BLEAK, HE LISTENED AS THE SERGEANT RASPED HIS REPORT...

WE'VE BEEN BADLY MAULED, SIR.
ANOTHER JERRY PATROL LIKE THAT
ONE WILL FINISH US OFF. SHOULD
WE PICK A DIFFERENT O.P.?

WE HAVEN'T
THE TIME.
JERRY IS TOO
CLOSE FOR
COMFORT.



WE'LL USE THE JEEP RADIO EQUIPMENT FOR DIRECT CONTACT AND SET UP THE OBSERVATION POST IN THE CASTLE TURRET.

RIGHT, SIR, YOU'LL NEED THE SIGNALLER, OF COURSE.



BACK AT THE RADIO-JEEP, TOM PRENTICE SUPERVISED THE REMOVAL OF THE HEAVY EQUIPMENT AND Fussed OVER IT AS SWEATING GUNNERS LUGGED IT UP THE STEEP SLOPE...

WATCH WHAT YOU'RE DOING THERE! THAT RADIO'S DELICATE.



FROM THE TOP OF THE CASTLE TURRET, A CLEAR VIEW COULD BE SEEN OF THE VALLEY BELOW. GRIMLY, MERSHAM STUDIED IT, AS TOM SET UP THE RADIO...

THEIR HEAVY ARMOUR IS JUST ENTERING THE FAR END OF THE VALLEY. HAVE YOU FINISHED, SIGNALLER?

ALMOST, SIR. I'M JUST WAITING FOR AN ANSWER.



MERSHAM TURNED AS TOM ESTABLISHED CONTACT WITH HEADQUARTERS. FACE SET, EYES COLD, HE STARED AT THE YOUNG SIGNALLER...



CURTLY, THE OFFICER CUT SHORT THE SIGNALLER'S VOICE HARD, HE RAPPED A SERIES OF ORDERS WHICH HIT TOM LIKE A FIST IN THE FACE ...



MERSHAM SNARLED HIS IMPATIENCE AS HE EXPLAINED. IT WAS BETTER FOR ONE MAN TO DIE THAN AN ENTIRE PATROL. SEALED BY RUBBLE, THE TURRET WOULD BE A STRONG DEFENCE AGAINST A GERMAN ATTACK...



THE NAKED CONTEMPT IN MERSHAM'S VOICE STUNG TOM LIKE A WHIPLASH. BUT SUDDENLY, TOM KNEW WHAT HE HAD TO DO ...



SETTING THE CHARGES OUTSIDE THE CASTLE, TOM CALLED THE SERGEANT, THEN DUCKED BACK IN THE TURRET AS THORN RAN INTO THE COURTYARD. BLANKLY, HE LISTENED TO THE SIGNALLER...



THORN STEPPED FORWARD, THEN JERKED TO A HALT AS TOM LIT THE FUSE, SWEEPING UP THE OFFICER IN HIS BRAWNY ARMS, HE RACED FROM THE COURTYARD...



UP IN THE TURRET, TOM STARED AT THE SHAPES OF THE ENEMY IN THE VALLEY BELOW. CAREFULLY, HE CHECKED HIS MAP REFERENCES ...

B-FOR-BAKER
CALLING A-FOR-
ABLE. FIRE RANGING
SHOT REFERENCE
THREE-SIX
FIVE-ONE.



A FOUNTAIN OF DIRT AND FLAME FLOWERED IN THE VALLEY. GRIMLY, TOM CALLED CORRECTIONS AS THE GERMANS BELOW BEGAN TO SCATTER ...

LEFT TWO
HUNDRED AND
UP THREE
HUNDRED.
FIRE, ONE
TROOP!

IF I'VE
GUESSED
RIGHT, THOSE
SHELLS SHOULD
LAND JUST
WHERE THE
JERRIES ARE
RUNNING.



FOUR GUNS FLUNG THEIR SHELLS INTO THE SKY AS TOM TENSELY COUNTED THE SECONDS. THEN THE SCREAMING WHINE OF FALLING PROJECTILES ENDED IN ROARING CHAOS...



GRIM-FACED, HAUPTMANN BRAUN GLARED AT THE RUINED CASTLE. HARSHLY, HE BARKED ORDERS TO HIS DEMORALISED TROOPS...

WHAT IS KLAUS THINKING OF?
HE SHOULD HAVE TAKEN THAT POSITION BY NOW.
TAKE A PATROL AND SEE TO IT, FELDWEBEL!

JAWOHL,
HERR
HAUPTMANN!



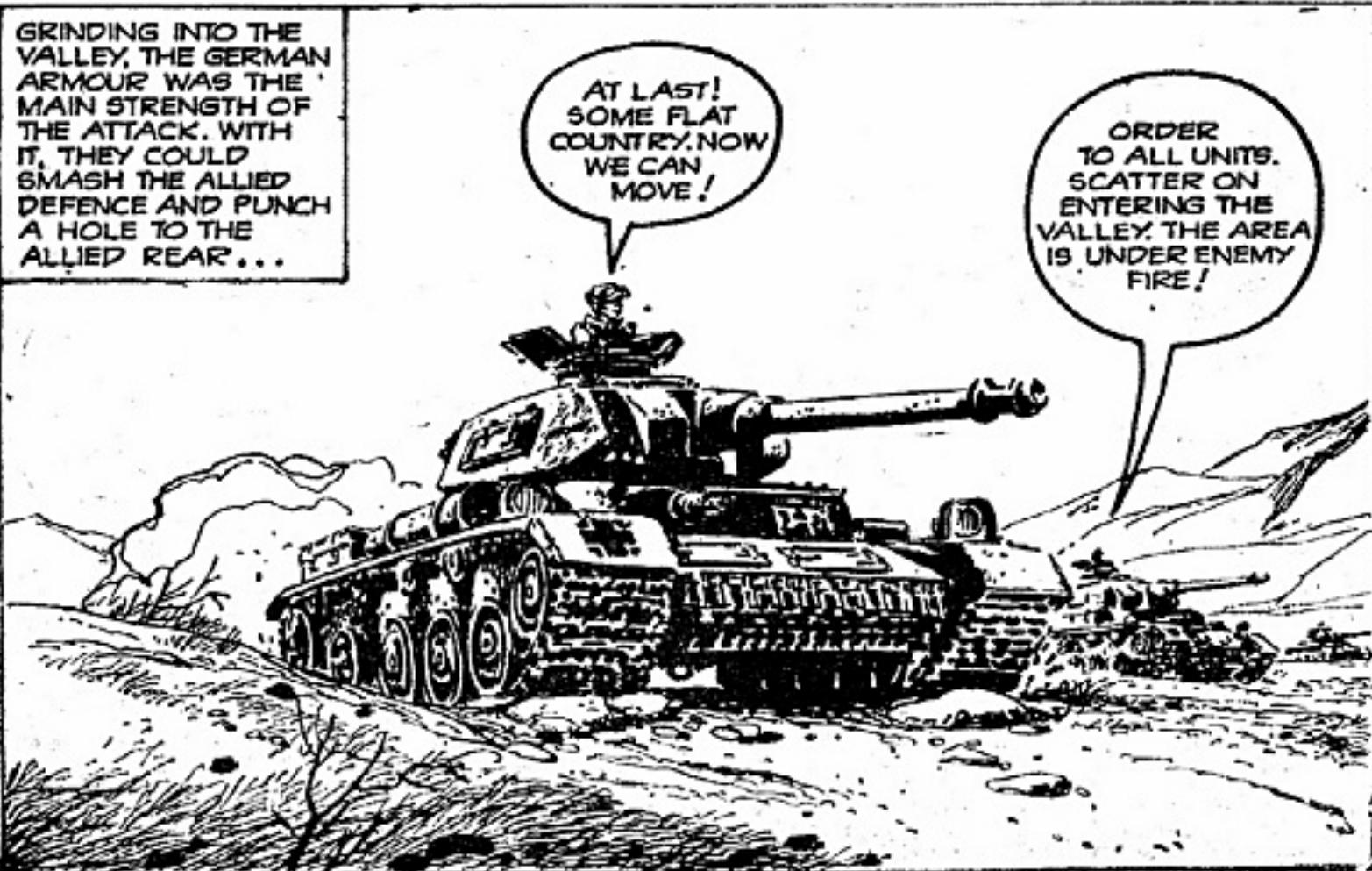
BUT IT WAS A LONG WAY TO THE CASTLE, MOST OF IT OVER OPEN COUNTRY, AND TOM HAD ESTIMATED THE RANGE ACCURATELY. THE GERMAN PATROL WERE CAUGHT BY SHELLFIRE WITHOUT A CHANCE OF GETTING UNDER COVER ...



GRINDING INTO THE VALLEY, THE GERMAN ARMOUR WAS THE MAIN STRENGTH OF THE ATTACK. WITH IT, THEY COULD SMASH THE ALLIED DEFENCE AND PUNCH A HOLE TO THE ALLIED REAR ...

AT LAST!
SOME FLAT COUNTRY. NOW
WE CAN MOVE!

ORDER
TO ALL UNITS.
SCATTER ON
ENTERING THE
VALLEY. THE AREA
IS UNDER ENEMY
FIRE!



PERCHED HIGH IN THE TURRET, TOM STARED THROUGH NARROWED EYES AT THE DISTANT DUST OF THE ENEMY TANKS...

FIRE ONE RANGING SHOT FIVE HUNDRED YARDS SHORT OF EXTREME RANGE ON REFERENCE SIX.

I'VE GOT TO FOOL THOSE JERRIES SOMEHOW!

SMOKE AND FLAME SOARED FROM A POINT WELL IN FRONT OF THE COLUMN. THEN, OTHER RANGING SHOTS EXPLODED HARMLESSLY AHEAD...

THEIR GUNS CANNOT REACH US YET, HERR HAUPTMANN!

IT WILL BE EASIER TO SCATTER WHEN WE ARE DEEPER IN THE VALLEY. DO SO WHEN WE REACH THE LIMIT OF THEIR RANGE.

CONFIDENTLY, THE GERMANS PRESSED FORWARD AS TOM, COUNTING THE SECONDS, RAPPED ORDERS TO THE DISTANT BATTERY...

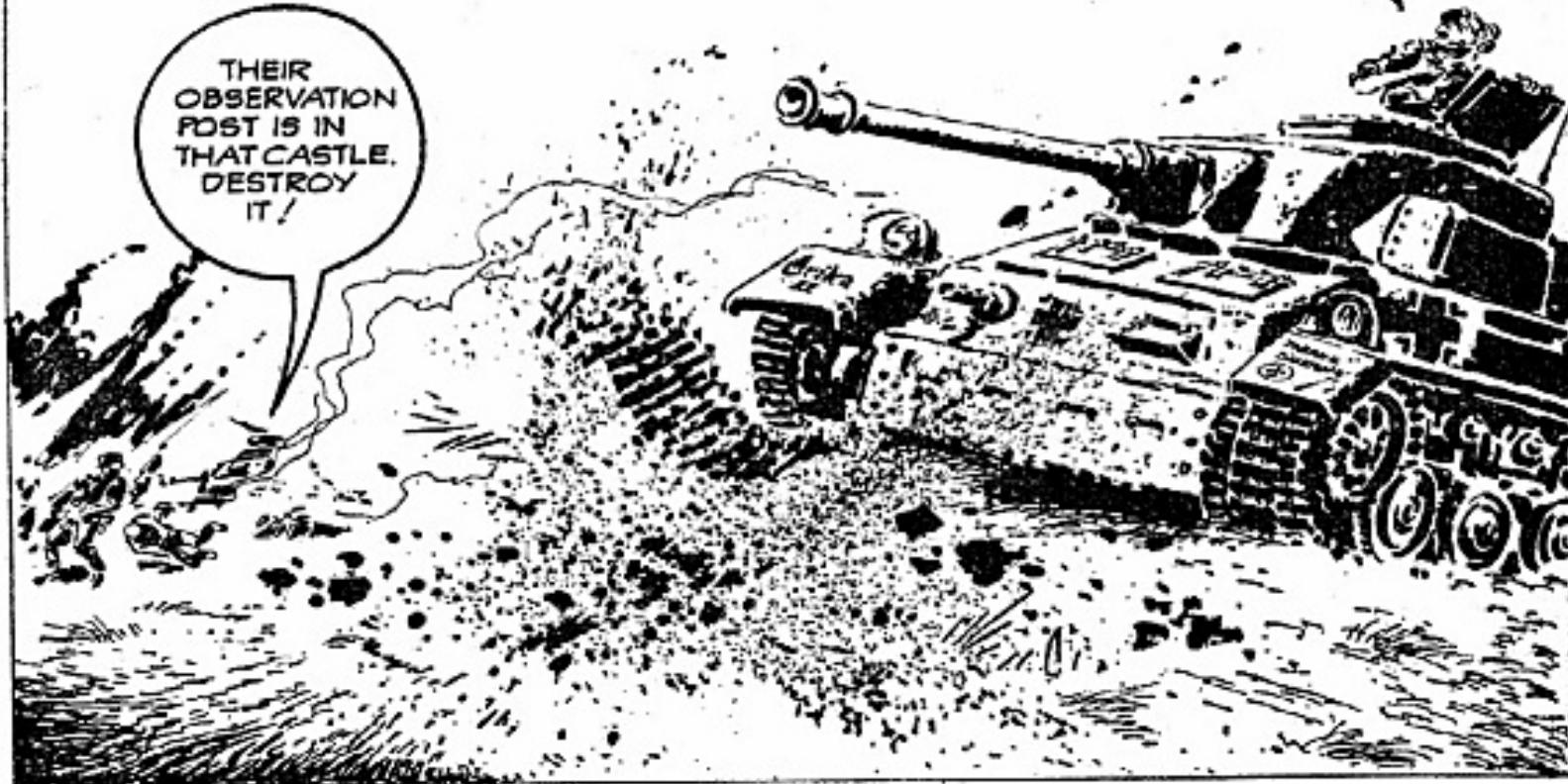
FIRE IN TEN SECONDS, EXTREME RANGE, THE SAME REFERENCE AS BEFORE, GIVE IT ALL YOU'VE GOT!

RIGHT, FIRING IN SEVEN SECONDS...

STEEL AND EXPLOSIVE SEARED THE SKY AS THE BRITISH SALVOES CRASHED DOWN ON THE GERMAN ARMOUR, THE VERY GROUND SHUDDERING TO THE SAVAGE FURY OF THE DISTANT GUNS...

THE ENGLANDERS HAVE TRICKED US! SCATTER, YOU FOOLS!

THEIR OBSERVATION POST IS IN THAT CASTLE. DESTROY IT!

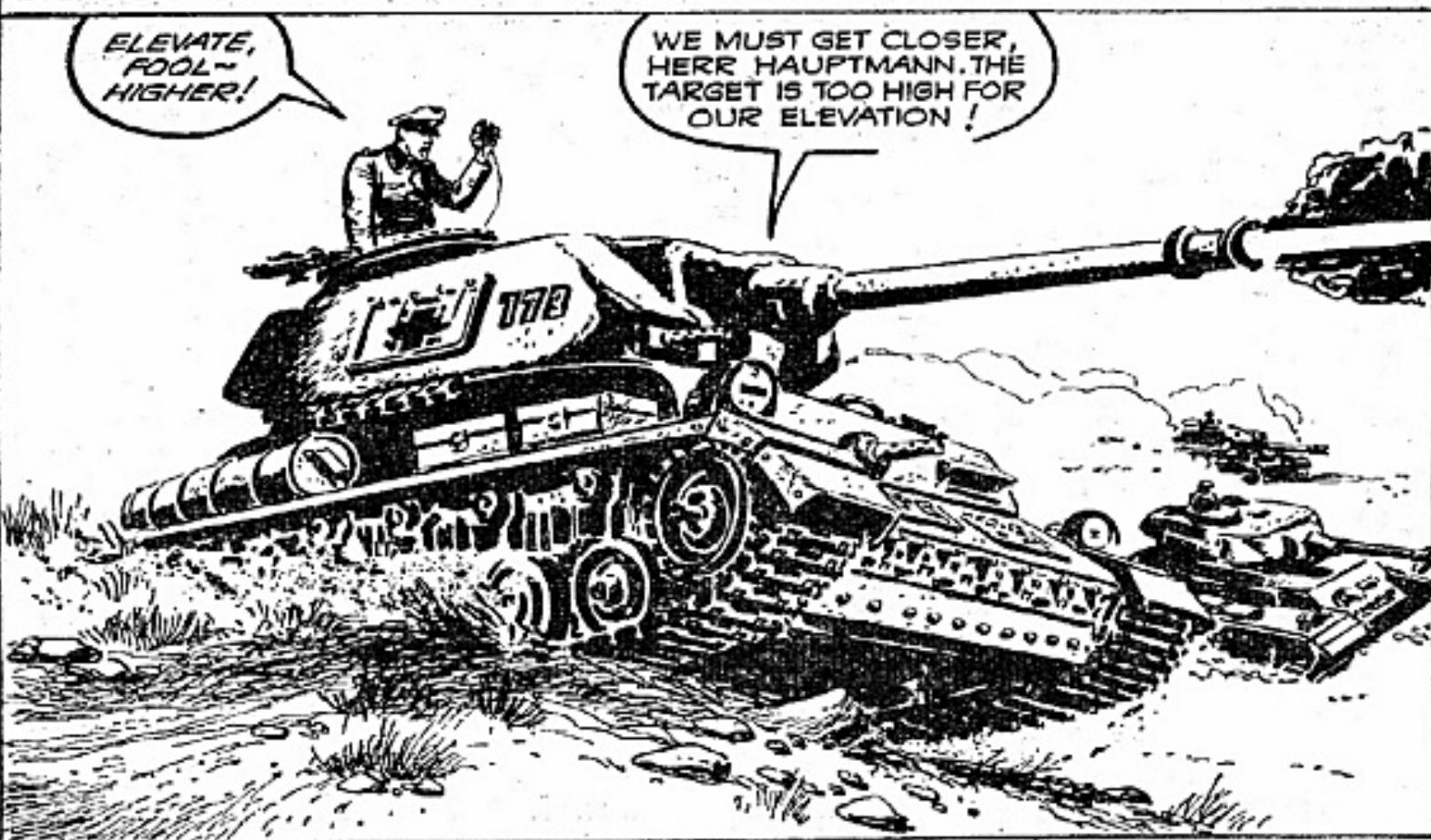


TENSE WITH STRAIN, TOM WATCHED THE GERMAN ARMOUR SCATTER AND HEAD TOWARDS HIM. TIME, HE KNEW, WAS RUNNING OUT FOR HIM...

THEY'RE GETTING TOO CLOSE, BUT THEY'RE TOO SCATTERED TO MAKE AN EASY TARGET.

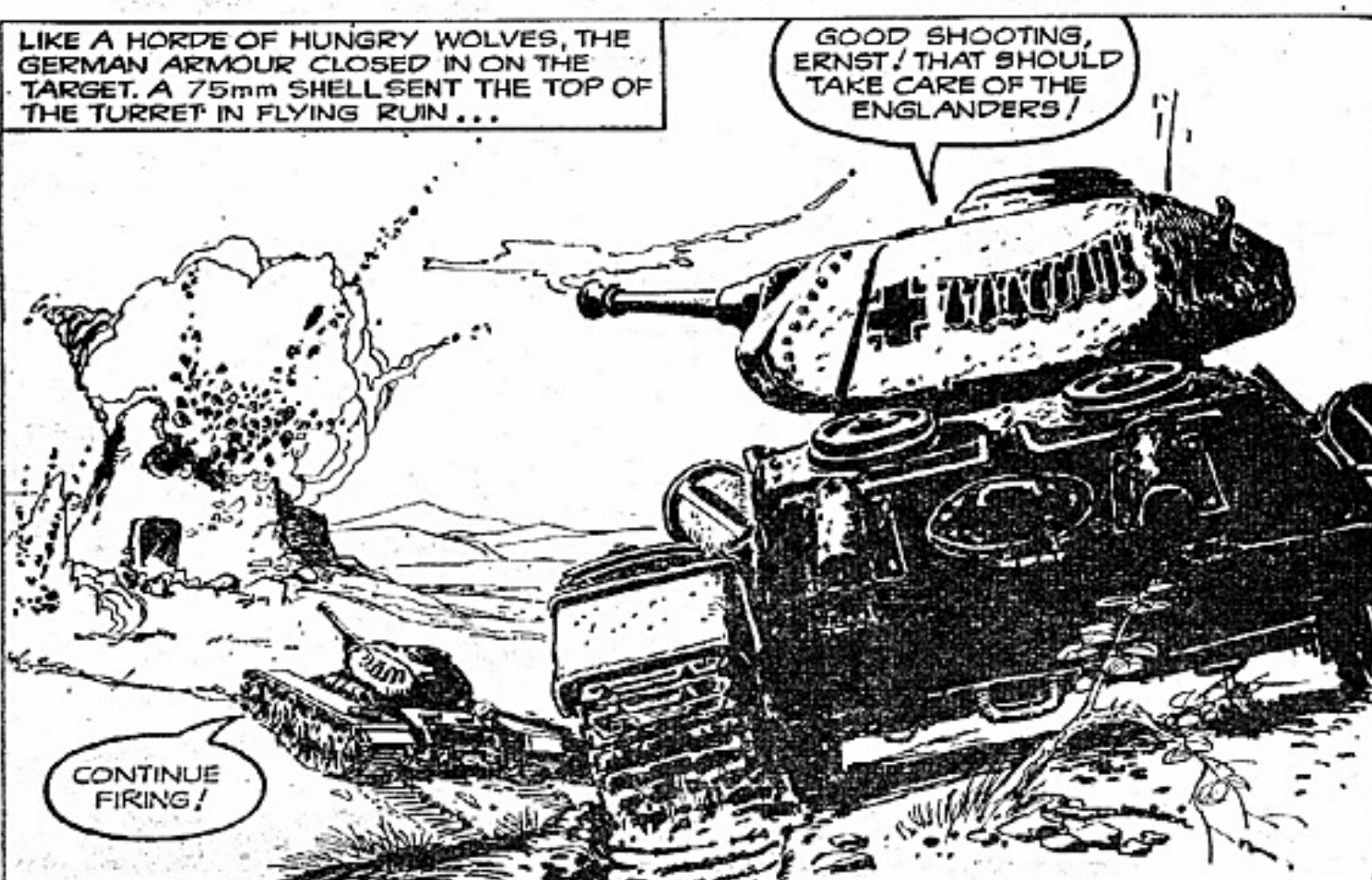


EVERY GERMAN IN THE VALLEY KNEW THE DANGER LURKING IN THE CASTLE AND EVERY GUNNER CONCENTRATED ON THE TOTAL DESTRUCTION OF THE ANCIENT BUILDING ...



LIKE A HORDE OF HUNGRY WOLVES, THE GERMAN ARMOUR CLOSED IN ON THE TARGET. A 75mm SHELL SENT THE TOP OF THE TURRET IN FLYING RUIN ...

GOOD SHOOTING, ERNST! THAT SHOULD TAKE CARE OF THE ENGLANDERS!



AS THE SHELL RIPPED THE TURRET, TOM DESPERATELY FLUNG HIMSELF OVER HIS EQUIPMENT, TRYING TO PROTECT THE PRECIOUS RADIO WITH HIS BODY...



AS SHELLS CRASHED INTO THE CASTLE, TOM GAVE HIS LAST ORDER TO THE BATTERY. WEAKLY, HE ORDERED FULL SALVOES, CUTTING SHORT THE STARTLED OBJECTION...



WITHIN SECONDS, THE AREA AT THE FOOT OF THE CASTLE BECAME A RAGING INFERNO, AS SHELLS DROPPED FROM THE SKIES IN A RAIN OF DESTRUCTION...



SAFE FROM THE HOLOCAUST, LIEUTENANT MERSHAM GROANED AS HE OPENED HIS EYES. DAZEDLY, HE STARED AT THE ANXIOUS FACE ABOVE HIM ...



MERSHAM READ THE NOTE. IT WAS A FULL CONFESSION OF TOM'S LIES ABOUT THE MISSING MESSAGE. GRIMLY, MERSHAM CLIMBED TO HIS FEET...



BOTH MEN KNEW WHAT THE UNCANNY SILENCE MUST MEAN. EITHER THE GERMANS HAD DESTROYED THE OBSERVATION POST OR THEY THEMSELVES HAD BEEN WIPE OUT. THORN SOON FOUND OUT...



TOM WAS DEAD, TRAPPED AND CRUSHED BENEATH TONS OF STONE, KILLED BY THE VERY SHELLS HE HAD CALLED DOWN ON THE ENEMY, KNOWING THE PRICE HE WOULD HAVE TO PAY.



TO SERGEANT THORN, THAT WAS EXPLANATION ENOUGH. BUT MERSHAM FELT THERE WAS MORE TO IT. YOUNG TOM PRENTICE HAD, IN THE END, FOUND WHAT HE WAS LOOKING FOR...



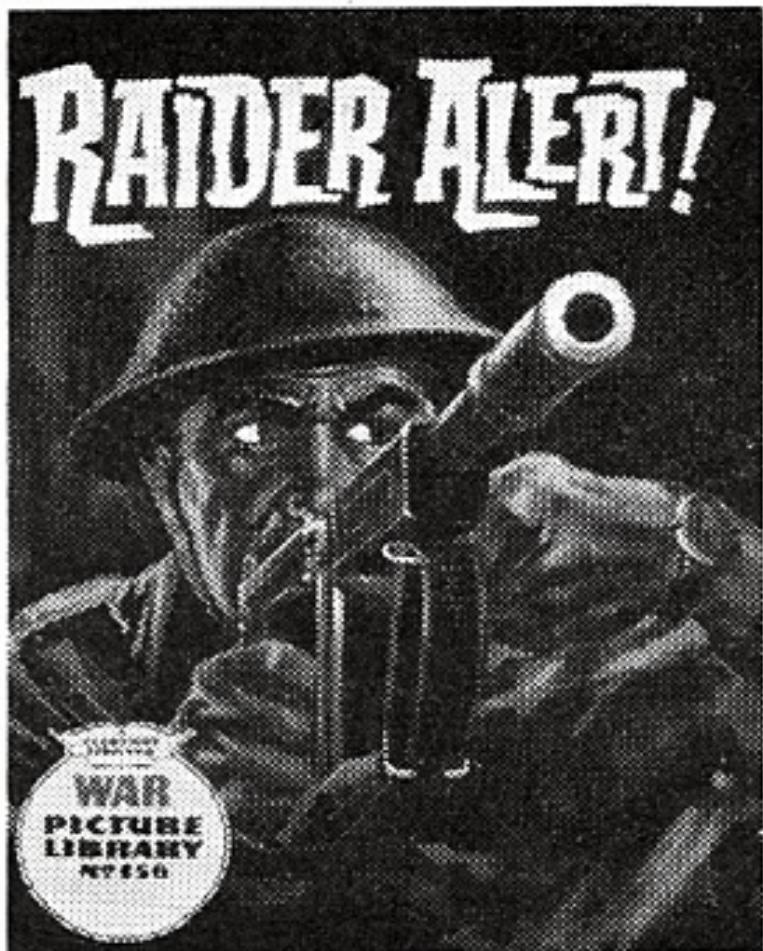
THE BOY WHO HAD
ALWAYS ADMIRE
BRAVERY, STRENGTH,
AND FORTITUDE HAD
FINALLY FOUND THOSE
QUALITIES IN HIMSELF!

ALSO ON SALE NOW

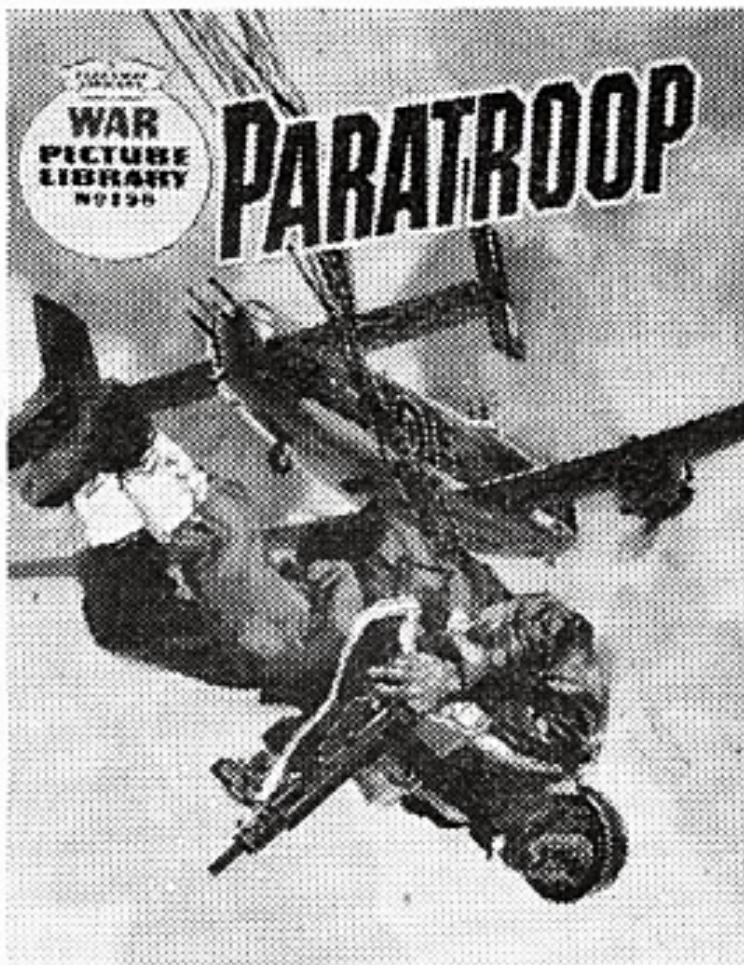
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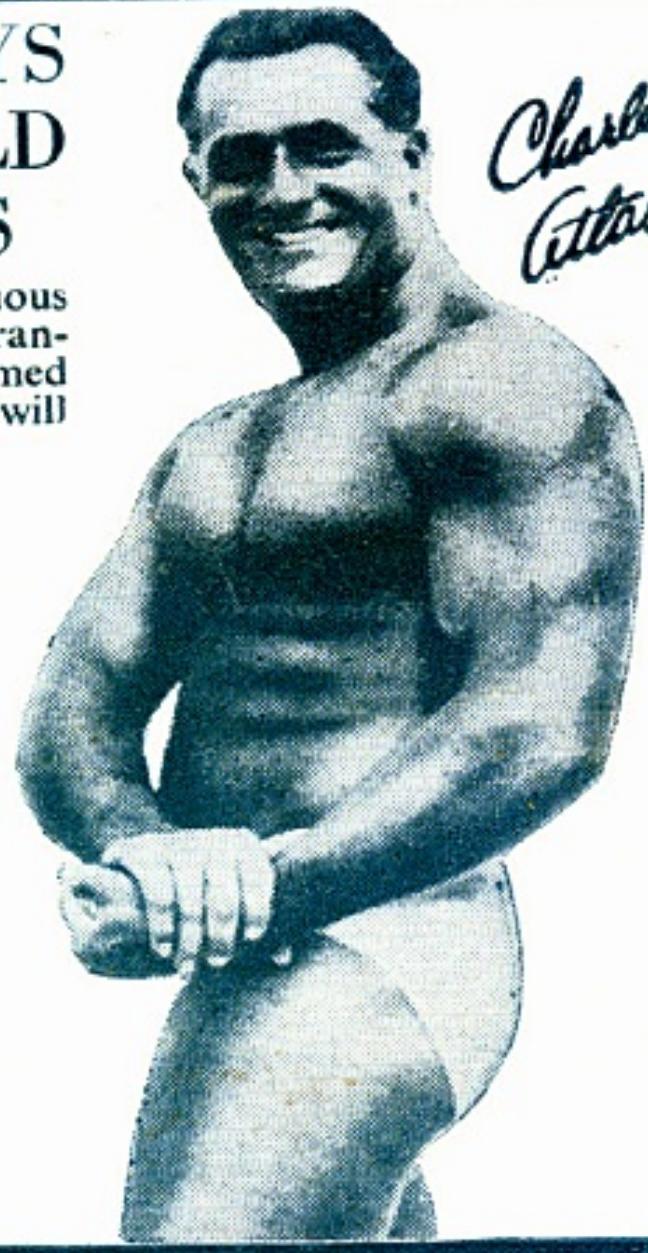
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